

# Holy Boldness

The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James

Acts 4:23-31

Sermon Series:  
God's Big Story

*God's story continues in the lives of all people, past and present, who seek to live as true disciples of Jesus.*

Garrison Keillor hosts the venerable radio show *The Prairie Home Companion*. He describes life in the make-believe world of Lake Wobegon, where “all the women are strong, all the men are good looking and all the children above average.” *Newsweek* magazine asked Keillor in 2007 to rank his five most important books. Many readers were surprised to learn which book appeared first on his list—the book of Acts. Keillor offered a one-sentence, poetic summation for his choice of Acts: “The flames lit on their little heads and bravely and dangerously went they onward.”

Keillor is onto something here. Acts chronicles the transformation of Jesus' once timid disciples into bold witnesses. Peter is exhibit A of God's transformation. Peter denies three times in quick succession any association with Jesus in the gospels. In Acts, Peter emerges as Jesus' chief spokesmen.

God's Big Story of creation, fall and redemption doesn't end with Jesus. God's story continues in the lives of all people, past and present, who seek to live as true disciples of Jesus.

This summer, we're asking you to read God's Big Story along with us. Our daily devotional, *Acts of a Disciple: from the Pew to the*

*World*, invites your participation, meditating on each chapter in Acts that will serve as the subject of Sunday's sermon. This devotional can deepen your experience of worship. The reflection and response questions can help guide you into faith formation and discipleship. This devotional is designed to be portable. I took it to the gym this past week and read it on the exercise bike, to help ease the pain!

The readings this week are taken from the fourth chapter of Acts. Peter and John heal a crippled man in chapter 3, which creates quite a sensation in Jerusalem. This former cripple is well-known to people. No doubt this beggar is a steady fixture at the entrance to the temple.

The religious leaders attempt to curb people's enthusiasm by arresting Peter and John. These two disciples are detained overnight. Maybe their incarceration will temper their zeal for preaching. Peter and John appear the next morning before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish equivalent to our Supreme Court. The Sadducees, referenced in verse 1, constitute one of the political parties that comprise the Sanhedrin. The Sadducees don't believe in a resurrection or a personal Messiah. They represent the wealthy aristocracy of Jerusalem. They control most of the wealth and land in Israel. Their friendly rela-

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tions with the Roman government affords them prestige and power. That's why they ask, "By what power or by what name do you do this?" (4:7). They want to know the source of the power emanating from people so far down the religious pyramid.

Peter, filled with the Spirit, appeals to their sense of reason—Let's see if I understand this right; we're on trial today on account of a good deed done to a cripple? (4:9). It sounds rather absurd when he says it this way. A crippled man has been healed, but the only thing on the minds of these religious power brokers is the threat Peter and John pose to their authority and status.

Peter and John are clear about identifying the source of their power: "It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth whom you crucified, but whom God raised from the dead that this man stands before you healed" (4:10). Bold move!

The Sanhedrin enter into an executive session meeting. The rhetorical ability of these simple fishermen baffles them. There's also the obstacle of the miracle itself. How are they going to refute the healing of a cripple? It's rather incredulous, don't you think, that they don't ponder this miracle for themselves. Instead, they call Peter and John on the carpet for preaching without a license.

Peter and John stand their ground. "Whether it is right in God's sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for

we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard" (4:20). Another bold move!

Upon their release, Peter and John rejoin the other believers. After hearing their report, they lift their voices in prayer (4:24). They don't ask God to be excused from further persecution. They don't seek divine protection and safety. They ask God for boldness to meet the challenge. "Lord, look at their threats, and grant to your servants to speak your word with all boldness" (4:29).

When we face opposition, we ask God to remove the opposition. These disciples ask for courage equal to the challenge. Their prayer is immediately answered with earth-shaking confirmation. "When they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; they are all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the Word of God with boldness" (4:31).

They ask for boldness, and they receive boldness. Boldness is a pivotal word in Acts (2:9; 4:13, 29, 31; 9:27-28; 13:46; 28:31). I wish we had time to consider all the references to boldness, but one will suffice. In the last verse of the book of Acts, we read, "Boldly...he [Paul] preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ" (28:31).

The boldness on display in Acts isn't pushy or nervy. It isn't brutal or sassy. The boldness of Acts is an amalgam of three things: conviction plus courage plus transparency.

One of our church's seven covenants is witness boldly. We deliberately chose the adverb boldly to

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counteract the timidity of our age. We are so afraid of saying anything that might offend anyone that we are reduced to saying nothing. A Protestant pastor in the 16th century, named Hugh Latimer, once preached to a congregation that included King Henry VIII. King Henry was so offended with something Latimer said that he ordered him to apologize the following Sunday. The next Lord's Day, Latimer read the same Biblical text as the previous Sunday and began his sermon with the following words:

"Hugh Latimer, do you know before whom you are this day to speak? You are going to speak before high and mighty king, Henry VIII, who can take away your life, if you offend him. Therefore, take heed that you speak not a word that may displease. But then consider well, Hugh Latimer, remember you are also to speak before the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. Take heed that you deliver the message faithfully."

Latimer went on to preach the exact same message he had preached the previous Sunday, with even greater vigor and energy. Bold move! Everyone thought the king would execute Latimer. Instead, the king invited Latimer to dinner. After supper the king said, "Hugh Latimer! How did you dare preach that same sermon and use those same words?"

Latimer answered, "I did as my conscience and the duty to God required of me."

The king stretched out his hand, "I thank God I have one honest man in the kingdom."

Latimer was bold in the face of danger.

Early Christians prayed for boldness. God answered their prayer with utmost clarity. They spoke the Word of God with tenacity and courage.

Mike Bechtle has written a book on evangelism entitled *Evangelism for the Rest of Us: Sharing Christ within your Personality Style*. Bechtle describes himself as an introvert who has been frustrated by extrovert approaches to evangelism. He claims most of the books on evangelism have been written by extroverts. His book could be called *Evangelism for Introverts*. Engaging strangers in conversation may fit well with extroverts but not introverts. Forcing introverts to strike up instant conversations with strangers at a deep level isn't the only way to do evangelism.

Bechtle claims introverts have some distinct advantages when it comes to evangelism. Introverts are often adept at listening to people and tend to build lasting relationships. Introverts have the patience to let God use them over a long period of time in someone's life instead of focusing just on that person's immediate decision about Christ. His point is well-taken. We can speak the Word of God with boldness whether we are introverts or extroverts. God has created us with a distinct temperament type to reach certain kinds of people.

If you desire to be disciples who speak the Word of God with bold-

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ness, follow the example of these first Christians. Pray for boldness. The Holy Spirit fills them with boldness as they pray. They are filled with Holy Spirit boldness when they have the courage to ask for it.

In 1962, a 14-year-old by the name of Robert White wrote to President John F. Kennedy's personal secretary requesting the president's autograph. Within a few weeks, Evelyn Lincoln honored the boy's request by sending him a facsimile signature in the mail. That began a relationship of correspondence that lasted 33 years. Impressed with Robert's passion for presidential history, Evelyn Lincoln sent him thousands of documents and mementos. She saved whatever could be saved, including even the doodles JFK drew on White House notepaper during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Robert White, before his death, had amassed the largest private collection of Kennedy memorabilia, totaling over 50,000 items.

Receiving begins with the courage to ask. "Ask and you shall receive. Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened to them" (Matthew 7:7-8).